

MSOD 614 Written Assignment #3 – Post Session Reflection

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The experiences and knowledge I acquired in MSOD 613/614 triggered a profound shift in my conscious awareness and understanding of group dynamics and how I interact in groups. While the experience in MSOD 612 during my first trip to Pájaro could be characterized as being a deeper extension of familiar intrapsychic work I had done in the past, the concepts and experiences of the second intensive were mostly unfamiliar and well out of my comfort zone. They had a profound impact on how I see the world and how others see me.

These past weeks have not only been for me the most intense period of the MSOD program to date, they have also been the most insightful in detecting patterns in my interactions with others. The steady peeling back of the mental and emotional layers during this time has allowed me to better observe and reflect on the shifts that have taken place within me. These shifts have brought clarity and answers to questions about personal triggers and motivations, while, at the same time, they are raising new questions and possibilities about the trajectory of my personal growth and effectiveness in group settings. The internal processing is far from over and I expect it to continue for many more months to come, or, perhaps, even longer. However, as I look back on what I have learned so far, four key insights stand out as precipitating the greatest shifts.

1. Group-As-A-Whole.

MSOD 613 introduced me to the theory and principles of group-as-a-whole and group-as-mother. Although these concepts were new to me, they made perfect sense right away. That an individual's relationship with group could be compared to an infant's relationship with its mother provided useful and insightful parallels. As I learned about such terms as projective identification, role differentiation, scapegoating, valency, and collusion, this theory served as a robust framework for me to overlay onto past personal experiences in my professional life, and to reexamine them with fresh eyes. This new lens led to new observations, new questions, and new insights.

It was particularly meaningful as I reexamined the events that occurred in my job last year leading up to my dismissal in October. For four months I had been reassigned to work under two executives who co-shared the leadership of a large system-wide transformation effort. My team were the boots on the ground and principal change facilitators working in triads with operational leaders and physicians across multiple acute

care facilities. The initiative was complex, multitiered, with challenging, if not, unrealistic, financial goals and an aggressive timeline. Given the ambiguity of the environment and the constant political tug-of-war among the executive leaders, external consultants, and my team, I understand now how I was scapegoated and blamed for many of the issues which befell the project. Being in this painful position created a visceral experience and upon reflection, this human drama could not have been avoided.

Now, five months later, I've learned from former colleagues the environment has not changed: turmoil and project delays continue, costs continue to rise, other "scapegoats" have been weeded out, along with further project restructuring and voluntary employee turnover. In hindsight, I realize that within the project organization there was no awareness of the group level dynamics at play. And there continues to be no awareness going forward. Without this awareness, I expect the status quo to continue. Being able to study group dynamics within the context of group-as-a-whole has expanded my awareness, allowing me to observe group behavior from a new perspective and gain useful insights. I believe this will serve me well in my career going forward.

2. Organizations as machines.

In Morgan's *Images of Organizations*, I was challenged to consider other ways of viewing organizations beyond the traditional mechanistic view. As a dedicated quality and process improvement deployment champion for several large organizations, my filter has been keenly honed to view process variation as anathema to operational effectiveness. Consistency is achieved through clearly defined process flows, measurable inputs and outputs, standard operating procedures, training, and feedback loops. The "people stuff" was left for managers and supervisors to handle, to create rewards and punishment to reinforce desired behaviors supporting these processes. However, learning about holistic organizations and holographic design caused a crack in the foundation of my worldview and I started to question if organizations really are machines. If that's true, why have I seen firsthand so much recidivism in process improvements over time? Why is it so hard to foster an environment where human behavior is consistent and predictable?

A second assault on my old belief came later at Pájaro, during Gary's presentation on organization theory. Gary drew a distinction between diagnostic and dialogic intervention. He shared his distaste with the term "diagnostic" because it suggested the existence of an ideal state, and that the diagnosis was an identification of a pathology of the current state that needed to be fixed. I was initially confused by his

critique. My immediate reaction was to defend the diagnostic approach. I heard my inner voice telling myself, “Of course. There’s a problem. Why do you take issue with finding out what’s wrong?”

These two moments precipitated a raging debate in my head by challenging an old belief pattern with new questions. By the end of the intensive, and after more internal debate, I realized I needed to let go of my old belief and embrace a new truth: organizations are not machines. More specifically, human systems are not machines. Letting go of this belief pattern also required having to let go of the belief that effective and preferred interventions must be diagnostic in nature, designed to fix what is broken. But letting go with the old and swapping it for the new has not been easy for me. Even as I write this I am uneasy about the implications of this new belief. I have been forced to dig deep into my past and reexamine my professional life over the last two decades as a process improvement and change leader, the status associated with such leadership positions, and the meaning I assigned to process methodologies like Business Process Reengineering and Lean Six Sigma. What will become of this? Do I turn over a new leaf or integrate new learnings into existing patterns?

3. Instrumental versus expressive communication.

The third major shift in consciousness occurred when I discovered an overwhelmingly instrumental bias in my communication style and interactions with others. This bias (born out of the previously stated old belief of trying to fix things) reflects the ingrained “do and tell” spirit of the Western culture that defines me. However, as I read Palmer’s *A Hidden Wholeness* and Schein’s *Humble Inquiry*, and learned about expressive communication, circles of trust, and humble inquiry, I became increasingly aware of an unmistakable inner sense of growing disenchantment and fatigue with the relentless “do and tell” communication style I had so vigorously adopted. I have been ready for change for a while and these insights were the much-needed spark to ignite the shift.

4. Shared contribution.

The fourth great shift in consciousness occurred when I recognized I needed to own my portion of a shared contribution to an outcome. Finding this middle path is an ongoing calibration exercise to locate the balance of co-ownership and responsibility in interactions with others and to move away from established personal behavior patterns I typically engaged in at both extremes; that is, on one end taking on other people’s stuff as my own and, on the other end, disowning my own stuff.

Coming into the experiential learning group, I was of a mindset to speak my mind, to see what happens, and to let others own and take responsibility for how they receive what I dish out. After all, this was a

laboratory designed to safely experiment with behavior. What could go wrong? Supporting this attitude was an underlying personal belief that individuals have the power to create their own realities. Therefore, regardless of what one says or does, how I respond in the moment is in my control. The trigger does not come from someone or something “out there” but from within me. It is something I own. I can choose to hold onto it, change it, or let go.

In that spirit I experimented in our group session and was prepared to, as one group member described, “break some china”. When two members were in an emotional exchange that had gone on for a period of time, each tearfully reinforcing the other with reassurances, I began to get annoyed that the same points were being made over and over again. I finally blurted out rather bluntly and emphatically, “I’m getting impatient. You’re just going in circles!” That caused an immediate shift in the mood of the room. One of the two members engaged in the exchange called my communication style aggressive and overpowering, which was causing her to contract and make her voice small, I replied, “Bullshit! I can’t make your voice small. You’re choosing to make your voice small”. That was my starting in position and, as the rest of the group glared at me or lowered their heads in silence, I knew then, in that moment, I was clearly left on my own to hang out and dry.

By the time the group session wrapped up the next morning after giving each other feedback, I realized I needed to change my approach if I am to become more effective in my interactions with others. I must own how I come across. It was not up to the other person to own the entire interaction. And that’s when the concept of shared contribution (from the book *Difficult Conversations*) finally clicked for me. It did not mean breaking the china and walking away from the mess believing it was the china’s weak will that caused it to shatter into pieces. Nor did shared contribution mean I must overcompensate in the other extreme and take on other people’s stuff over my own. So, it is the middle path I am taking going forward. We’ll see where that leads.

Poetic Summary

To reduce my thoughts to their quintessential core, I close this paper with a personal haiku:

On my time in Pájaro

Group yearns to connect,

to perceive through heart and mind

unanswered questions.